SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION: CRITICAL COMPONENTS

This material excerpts key points included in Applying Effective Strategies to Prevent Substance Use and Violence Among Students in Grades K-12, *by Kimberly Dash, Phyllis Scattergood, Cheryl Vince Whitman, Wayne Harding, Melanie Adler, Chelsey Goddard, and Athi Myint-U, a publication currently under development at the New England Comprehensive Assistance Center at EDC and the Northeast CAPT.*

The Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (CAPT)

Health and Human Development Programs at EDC

I.   OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION

A.   **Historically, schools have played an important role in preventing substance abuse and violence among young people.**

Schools offer opportunities to reach all children and also serve as important settings for specific groups at risk, such as children with behavior problems and learning disabilities and those who are potential dropouts. Indeed, schools have been the driving force behind prevention efforts in many communities.

The school environment and individual academic performance affect a young person's inclination to engage in risky behaviors. A child's academic performance at school and inclination to stay in school ultimately affect his or her health and well-being.[1] Not only do schools provide students with the solid academic foundation needed to promote future well-being, but they also help equip students with the skills that enable them to make choices about healthy lifestyles throughout life, including avoiding substances and violence.

B.   **Schools can enhance their efforts to reduce or prevent substance abuse and violence among young people.**

Coordinate multiple, complementary strategies to address the issues of substance abuse and violence among young people. Traditionally, schools have been primarily responsible for developing and implementing curricula and instructional programs to address the substance abuse, violence, and many other problems young people face. While instructional programs have been important and necessary, and even effective at imparting knowledge, developing skills, and changing some behaviors, alone they are insufficient to produce far-reaching and long-lasting change. Research has revealed that to prevent or reduce rates of substance abuse and violence among youth, school-based prevention should involve a coordinated approach combining complementary strategies that address change not only at the individual level but also at the school, peer, family, community, and larger society levels.

Join with key community players to prevent or reduce substance abuse and violent activity. It is impossible to address the problems of substance abuse and violence in

the schools without considering factors in the surrounding community: the ways in which students and law enforcement interact, what health care providers say to students, the impact of liquor store sales and billboard advertising outside the schools, community attitudes and beliefs about gun control, or the messages conveyed daily by television programs, songs on the radio, MTV videos, and movies. Schools will need to reach out to collaborate with families and other agencies, such as social service, youth protection, community police, and recreational ventures, to create prevention programs. Schools are one of many organizations trying to prevent, reduce, or eliminate substance abuse and violence.

Engage in a rigorous strategic planning process that focuses on assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation. The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention points to some basic tenets of program planning that contribute to program effectiveness. Perhaps most vocal in pushing for strategic planning among schools has been the U.S. Department of Education's *Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Program,* that recommends that schools engage in a process which they have defined as the *Principles of Effectiveness.* These principles require that schools:

• Base their program on a thorough *assessment* of objective data about the drug and violence issues they experience.
• Establish a set of *measurable goals and objectives* and design their activities to meet those goals and objectives.
• *Design* and *implement* their activities based on research or evaluation proving that the strategies used prevent or reduce drug use, violence, or disruptive behavior among youth.
• *Evaluate* their programs periodically to assess progress toward achieving goals and objectives; use evaluation results to refine, improve, and strengthen their program; and to refine goals and objectives as appropriate.

II. SCHOOL–BASED PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Schools and their surrounding communities can play a critical role in helping students stay alcohol- and drug-free. Highlighted below are some key prevention strategies, distilled from a comprehensive review of the prevention evaluation literature. These are organized according to changes at three levels: individual students, schools and classrooms, and the larger community environment.

A. Individual Change Strategies

Perhaps the most common school-based approaches to prevent or reduce substance abuse, violence, and other high-risk behaviors are those designed to bring about individual behavior change.

> **Key Strategy 1:   Thinking, social, and resistance skills education for all students.**

Instructional approaches that combine social and thinking skills are one of the most effective ways schools can enhance students' abilities, attitudes, and behaviors inconsistent with substance abuse and other kinds of delinquent behavior. Certain skills are emerging as critical to preventing and reducing substance abuse and violent behavior, including empathy and perspective taking, social problem solving, anger management or impulse control, communication, stress management and coping, media resistance, assertiveness, character/belief development and resistance training. Instructional programs tend to be more effective when they:

• Combine social and thinking skills instruction with resistance skills training.
• Include an adequate "dosage" of at least 10 to 15 sessions per year and another 10 to 15 booster sessions offered one to several years after the original intervention.
• Reach children from kindergarten through high school.
• Use a well-tested, standardized intervention with detailed lesson plans and student materials.
• Use age-appropriate interactive teaching methods.
• Include components that are led by other students.
• Include a component for parents with pertinent information for them and their children.
• Are culturally appropriate.
• Offer professional development or training opportunities for school faculty and staff.

Perhaps the most popular approach to early identification and intervention, counseling for students at risk, including Student Assistance Programs, require more rigorous evaluation before they can be considered key strategies to school-based prevention.[2] Most effective at enhancing protective factors and reducing substance use, in particular, are those strategies designed to identify students and parents at risk and refer them to appropriate educational or therapeutic programs. Programs that target *families* at risk and that provide parent and family skills training, family in-home support, or family therapy have been shown to be effective in improving communication and fostering attachment in families of delinquent youth. These programs have also been shown to help improve parenting skills, reduce parents' substance abuse, improve child behavior, and reduce children's levels of substance use.[3] These family-centered programs tend to be more effective when they:

- Include components for both parents *and* children.
- Identify and expand upon the strengths of families.
- Include no more than 15 families per group.
- Offer incentives for participation.
- Increase parent involvement in and connection to the school through ongoing communication and consultation.
- Are facilitated by staff trained on the critical components of the program.
- Provide booster sessions for participating families.
- Are culturally sensitive.[4]

Key Strategy 3: Safe and supervised alternatives activities for students at risk

Recreational, enrichment, and leisure activities provide alternatives to dangerous activities such as substance use and violence. These activities may include community service, mentoring programs, recreational and cultural activities, school-to-work assignments, internships, and tutoring. Alternatives strategies are more likely to be effective if they:

- Are part of a comprehensive prevention program that includes other strategies that have been proven effective.
- Target young people at risk who may not have adequate adult supervision or access to a variety of activities.
- Address the needs and assets of the individual.
- Provide intensive approaches that include many hours of involvement with access to related services.
- Incorporate skills-building components.

B. Changing School and Classroom Environments

Meeting the needs of students most at risk for violence, substance use, or other related problems requires making comprehensive and integrated changes in the operation and organization of the school and or school system as a whole and across dimensions of learning.

Key Strategy 4: School-community collaboration in program planning and delivery

Schools in which the administration and faculty communicate well and work together with parents, students, and community members to plan for change and solve problems have higher teacher morale and less student disorder.[5] EDC programs related to organizational change in schools and elsewhere have identified several key factors to changing policies and practices to promote health. These include the following:

- Possess a clear vision for promoting health, well being, and social competence among young people.
- Have devoted program champions or leaders to guide planning and delivery efforts.
- Base prevention programming on an assessment of local needs and resources.
- Access and apply current information on effective prevention programming.
- Generate, through promotion and publicity, a critical mass of people who support program efforts.
- Provide ongoing professional development for school faculty and staff as well as for parents, students, and other community members as necessary.

- Adapt program strategies to local concerns and involve parents, students, and community members in program delivery.
- Obtain administrative support early to leverage needed resources.
- Mesh what is happening politically, economically, and socially at the national and local levels with what is needed at the local and school levels.
- Start slow with realistic expectations about what you can accomplish.

Key Strategy 5:   Clear school policies to prohibit substance use and violent behavior.

There is much from the literature on public health prevention to demonstrate that environmental interventions are effective at changing behavior and often provide the greatest results for the smallest cost. Indeed, there are some policy changes schools can make, and have probably already made, to promote a safe environment and prevent violence and substance use on school grounds or at school events. School policy changes might include, for example, drug- and gun-free zones, dress codes, security personnel, security devices, random inspections, identification cards or limited access for unauthorized personnel, and increased supervision of all areas of the school facility. More positive changes might include elimination of smoking areas for faculty and students, making sure the school environment is clean, reducing class size, installing adequate lighting, communicating expectations for behavior, etc. To help ensure that school policies are effective, take the following measures:

- Provide a rationale for the policy.
- Include a clear, positive statement about the behaviors the school expects students (and other school personnel) to exhibit.
- Include provisions for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation or treatment.
- Coordinate school policies with community policies regarding substance use and violence among youth.
- Specify clear consequences for infractions and compliance.
- Include rewards and recognition for those who behave appropriately.
- Communicate policies clearly to students, faculty, parents and the community.[6]

Key Strategy 6:   Enforcement of school policies with clear reward structures and unambiguous sanctions

Schools in which students' lives are governed by clear school rules and reward structures and unambiguous sanctions also experience less disorder. Such schools are likely to signal appropriate behavior for students.[7] Effective enforcement should:

- Promote and enforce specific rules or policies, including those regarding discipline, smoking, and alcohol.
- Be paired with communication strategies that emphasize changing certain norms about substance use, violence and disruptive behavior, and weapons.
- Offer deterrents, such as suspensions or expulsions, to substance use and violence.
- Include rewards and recognition for those who behave appropriately.

Key Strategy 7:   School-wide communication campaigns to influence school norms about substance use and violence

Programs aimed at setting, communicating, and reinforcing norms—clear, consistent social messages that teen alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and violence are harmful, unacceptable, and illegal—through school wide efforts reduce alcohol and marijuana use as well as delinquency.[8] With students, parents, and other community members, schools can communicate prevention messages through newsletters, posters, educational campaigns, presentations, articles in the school newspaper, and ceremonies. These communication campaigns tend to be more effective when they:

- Conduct an assessment to increase awareness and knowledge about the problem you want to target and the group you want to target.
- Form a committee or task group to coordinate campaign activities.
- Involve parents, teachers, and students.
- Clarify, implement, and enforce norms against substance use, violence, or weapons carrying.
- Correct student misconceptions about the prevalence of substance use, violence and weapons carrying among their peers.

Key Strategy 8: Classroom restructuring for more engaging and interactive education environments

Certain kinds of classroom management and teaching strategies are beginning to show promise in reducing the risk factors and promoting the protective factors associated with substance use and violence.[9] These strategies include, but are not limited to, classroom rule enforcement, use of rewards and punishments, cooperative learning, smaller class sizes, non-graded elementary schools, continuous progress instruction,* and computer assisted instruction. Consider doing the following to create more engaging and interactive classes:

- Use classroom control and transition methods that maintain a positive classroom environment and maximize the amount of time students spend on learning.
- Clearly define rules and expectations at the beginning of the year and teach these rules to students through structured lessons.
- Incorporate and provide opportunities for teamwork/cooperative learning in lesson plans.
- Continually monitor progress of each student to make sure that he or she gets the help he or she needs to master the lesson content and advance the student or group of students when they have achieved mastery.
- Regroup students in different ways to achieve smaller, less alienating, or otherwise more suitable microclimates within the school.

C.   Influencing Community Change

Understanding that most of the violence, delinquent behavior, and substance use among youth occurs off school grounds, schools can be pivotal players in bringing about changes in the surrounding community as well as the school. They can work to change policy; they can join forces with other community sectors to change community norms that encourage underage drinking and aggressive behavior. These activities at the community level combined with school-wide changes are especially crucial, given that evaluation research findings indicate that skills-based instruction alone, no matter how good, has a very small effect on substance use and violence among youth.

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* Instruction in which students advance through a defined hierarchy of skills after being tested for mastery at each level, usually with teachers providing instruction to groups of students at the same instructional level.

Key Strategy 9: Community policies to limit availability of controlled substances and weapons

Perhaps the most potent strategies for preventing, reducing, or eliminating substance use and violence are the creation, promotion, and enforcement of policies and norms designed to influence the larger environments in which people live and work. The most effective policies include laws, rules, and regulations that serve to control availability of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, firearms, and other weapons through pricing, deterrence for using or incentives for not using, restrictions on availability, and restrictions on use.

Schools, because they are considered a critical sector of the community especially around youth issues, can be influential in bringing about targeted policy changes at the community level—changes that are likely to affect the behavior of the young people they serve. For example, school personnel can work with community members to affect community policy and the environment in the following ways:

- Support legislation (including local ordinances) that will reduce availability of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and firearms to young people.
- Track and document substance abuse and violence indicators in your community.
- Provide expert or public testimony at local and state levels expressing your personal concern or experience.
- Discuss key legislative issues regarding substance use and violence prevention among youth at faculty or staff meetings.
- Endorse official reports, initiatives, and position papers on preventing youth crime and substance use.
- Adopt or pass policy statements/resolutions on limiting youth access to alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and firearms.
- Involve students in letter writing campaigns to lobby local, state, or national decision-makers about specific policy changes.

Consistent enforcement and reinforcement is needed to enhance the effectiveness of existing as well as new community policies regarding substance use and violent crime among young people. Schools can work with community members to enforce community-wide policies or regulations. Police officers, in particular, are important to enforcement, and as such, should be represented on your community advisory board, health task force, or school and community coalition. Young people, their parents, and other community members can also play an important role in combination with police. Schools can work with community members to affect enforcement of community policies in the following ways:

- Involve parents to pressure alcohol and tobacco outlets to check identification.
- Conduct undercover community buying operations that provide positive and negative feedback to merchants.
- Lobby for server training to be paired with increased enforcement of laws against service to intoxicated patrons and sales to minors.
- Track gun dealer compliance with federal, state, and local laws.
- Increase local and state budgets for effective prevention programs, including, but not limited to, community policing and high-risk youth programs.
- Reclaim housing projects, parks, or other places where young people congregate to drink alcohol and do or deal drugs.
- Identify and report illegal drug activities, including underage drinking, to police.

Key Strategy 11: **Community-wide communication campaigns to influence community norms about substance use and violence among youth**

In order for a community to accept, promote, and enforce a particular policy or regulation, there must some understanding of the problem and a readiness to change based on that understanding. Some school prevention programs have employed the local media and public education strategies to complement school-based efforts: influencing community norms as well as increasing public awareness about specific issues and problems related to substance use and violence among youth, attracting community support for other school program efforts, reinforcing school-based curriculum for students and parents, and keeping the public informed about program progress. Schools can lead or participate in the following kinds of communications activities: development of promotional or educational media (e.g., videos, fliers, posters); alcohol-free events; town meetings; press conferences, speeches, and educational workshops; news stories or features in the newspaper; interviews on radio or television talk shows; letters to the editor; and charts or graphs on pertinent data. Community and school communication campaigns are more successful when they:

- Are combined with more intensive and interactive prevention approaches.
- Present messages that appeal to the motives of young people for using substances or behaving violently or perceptions of substance use and violence.
- Put messages where young people are likely to see and hear them.
- Address young people's perceptions about the pervasiveness of substance use, violent or aggressive behavior, and weapons.
- Tailor messages to the audience.
- Avoid the use of authority figures and admonishments, as well as demonstration of harmful substances.[10]

For Additional Reading

There are a number of reviews of the prevention literature. You might want to consult these documents for more details on the kinds of strategies that have been proven effective at reducing, preventing, or eliminating substance use and violence among youth.

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Endnotes

1 See, for example, Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R., and Associates. (1992). *Communities that care: Action for drug abuse prevention.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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